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As we enter the sacred time we call Holy Week, the church overwhelms us with liturgy, Scripture and symbols. Each day has its own particular theme until we reach the climax of the liturgical year in the three-day-long liturgy we call the Triduum. Today's celebration, commonly called Palm Sunday, invites us to contemplate Jesus' last week on Earth, anticipating all that we will relive symbolically Thursday and Friday. Our readings from the Gospel of Mark begin with the crowds' exuberant but shallow adulation and end with Jesus' death on the cross.

Unlike many other Christians, Catholics have cherished the crucifix, the image of Christ on the cross, as a "sacramental," a rich and challenging symbol of our faith. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, sacramentals are an extension of our liturgical life. For many of the faithful, the sacramentals and especially depictions of Jesus' passion, are emotion-laden, tangible reminders of their relationship with Christ.

Some crucifixes seem almost bland, portraying a nearly emotionless Jesus. Others show him with an expression of immense sadness or in terrible suffering. The Eastern church which favors stylized icons over lifelike representations, maintains a practice of iconography carried out according to a carefully disciplined and well-developed theology. Every crucifix or depiction of the Passion is an interpretation of this mystery and communicates a theology, often all the more powerful for being visual rather than verbal.

Latin American churches are famous for depictions that emphasize Jesus' awful and bloody suffering. These images, like some famous Peruvian ones which portray Jesus with hands and feet distorted by unrelenting toil, emphasize Christ's union with those who suffer. People can gaze on him and know that God sympathizes with every human pain. Another related image, often called the Just Judge, depicts Jesus after he was flogged, crowned with thorns and seated with a wooden staff for a scepter. He looks at the observer as a judge who has experienced the height of injustice. The Just Judge reveals that God knows the same feelings as those who have been treated wrongly and that God will not forget them. All of these images make the truth of the Incarnation palpable by showing the depth of God's identification with those who suffer. Often people's response to those images is to touch or even kiss them in gratitude and solidarity.

Then, we have crucifixes which present Christ in some variety of priestly garments and/or wearing a crown. The icon called "The Great High Priest" depicts the victorious Christ garbed in a chasuble. This proclaims that Christ is, indeed, the high priest chosen by God to speak to humanity on God's behalf. He reigns over all things, including death. The message here is just what the Letter to the Hebrews says of Christ: He shared in humanity so "that through death he might

destroy the one who has the power of death ... and free those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life” (Hebrews 2:14-15). In much less formal language, James Alison, in his book *Jesus the Forgiving Victim*, describes this image as akin to Evel Knievel’s extraordinary motorcycle stunts. Only after Knievel rode his bike over an abyss and through fire could other bikers think it was possible and eventually try it themselves. Similarly, Christ’s victory on the cross, his ability to accept the cruelest sort of death with all its shame and abandonment, allows his followers to believe that, like Jesus, they can trust completely in the love of God. Christ crucified reveals that nothing, no loneliness or rejection, no humiliation, no pain, not even death, is more powerful, more valuable or more vital than the love of God. In Alison’s words, “Jesus’ death and resurrection is God’s way of proving that he is able and willing to hold humans in being through death ... So that we can, already, start to live as if death were not.”

One typical icon of the crucifixion depicts Jesus at the moment of death. His blood, flowing from his hands, feet and side into the opened earth, symbolizes that the redemption reaches all who have died. Four women are grouped at his right, holding and comforting one another; all they can do is be present to him and to one another. On the other side, John hides his face while the centurion looks up, declaring what no one else could say in the face of this scene: “Truly, this man was the Son of God.”

Holy Week is overwhelming. It bursts with liturgy and symbols to lead us ever deeper into the mystery of our faith. One way to take that in is to contemplate different depictions of Christ’s passion. We can allow the art to interpret what we have heard. As we gaze upon these scenes, they will lead us to reinterpret our own lives as well.

ISAIAH 50:4-7

For reasons that this reading makes abundantly clear, Isaiah’s “Servant Songs” were a favorite of the early Christians as they tried to understand the passion and death of Jesus. Jesus’ death is the starkest of all examples of the undeserved suffering of a just person. How completely it disoriented his followers was well described by the disciples going to Emmaus who explained that Jesus was “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people ... our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him” (Luke 24:19-20). What made it all as mysterious as it was scandalous was Jesus’ predictions that those events somehow coincided with God’s will.

Because we usually hear this passage from Isaiah in connection with the passion reading, we may proclaim it with a solemnity that belies the mood of the first few verses. If we allow the vocabulary of Verses 4 and 5 to guide us, there is considerable energy in the servant’s activity.

First, the prophet/servant admits openly that God has given him the gifts of a good education, what he calls a “well-trained tongue.” This statement presents him as someone with genuine confidence and appropriate humility. Unlike Moses, this man has oratorical skills. He immediately explains that those skills are a gift for the sake of others, and most specifically, for the weary. The servant is sent to the distressed and given every gift necessary to rouse them.

The servant portrays himself as someone sent by God to wake people up, to energize them and enliven their faith. One might picture any one of a number of leaders whose speech set hearts on fire and who could drag the weary, even the cynical, from their lethargy. As he describes his easy intimacy with the God who awakens him each morning, the servant underscores the fact that nothing he says comes from his own agenda. Every single day God gives him the grace of an ear to hear and a heart ready to obey. This is someone whose heart has been captivated and who has no hesitation about giving his life to God and to the message entrusted to him.

For anyone familiar with prophets, what happens next is disappointing but hardly surprising: The prophet is persecuted. But, this servant does not launch into a song of lament about what happened; what he describes is a kind of treatment that is more insult than injury. He has been spat upon and mistreated; his bones are not broken, his blood has not been shed, but he has been shamed, treated in a way intended to disgrace him in the eyes of the people.

This is where his faith in God overrides his self-preservation and any tendency to cling to ordinary conceptions of dignity. He confronted his persecutors with a face set like flint. He believed in God more than in his tormenters’ power. No matter what happened, he continued to say “The Lord God is my help, I shall not be put to shame.”

PSALMS 22:8-9, 17-18, 19-20, 23-24

The wonder of this psalm is that, with all he is going through, the psalmist is still addressing God at all. As Psalm 22 follows immediately on our reading from Isaiah, we can take it to be the prayer of one of God's faithful ones in a situation of persecution. With all of his sufferings, the worst sting of all must be the challenge: "He relied on the Lord ... let him rescue him if he loves him." From that, it's easy to understand the cry "My God, why have you abandoned me?"

This psalmist suffers far more than the servant in the Isaiah passage. Reading the whole psalm, we can see how it portrays every sort of suffering one could imagine. The psalmist has become an object of public derision, animals are after him, his blood has been shed, he is near starving, and he has been left naked while his enemies divide his clothing like the spoils of war.

Even so, the psalmist turns to God. None of this is enough to prove to him that God does not exist nor even that God refuses to hear his prayer. Deeper than all the suffering he feels, deeper than his pain and loneliness, the psalmist believes in God's love. Therefore, he can pray "be not far," and even look toward the day when he will again be in a position to proclaim God's faithful love in public.

PHILIPPIANS 2:6-11

In the book Letter to the Philippians, Dr. Peter T. O'Brien gives a wonderfully succinct explanation of the opening of this hymn. He quotes C.F.D. Moule who said that "precisely because he was in the form of God [Jesus] reckoned equality with God not as a matter of getting but giving."

As Paul uses the words of a hymn to develop his teaching about Christ, he is subtly explaining that Christ is the only adequate image of God known to humankind. Through Christ, we learn that God is not grasping, but rather relates to human beings as a servant who will give anything for their sake.

This will always be a difficult teaching. We tend to define God using the superlative of everything we prize as human beings: power, knowledge, prestige, beauty, etc. That description of God validates our own striving for similar prestige. Encountering God's self-revelation through the cross of Christ deals a deathblow to all those aspirations.

Paul tells us that because Jesus so adequately revealed God as pure self-giving, God could give him the name above every other name. Our greatest act of faith may be to see Jesus Christ, the crucified, as the image of the glory of the Father.

MARK 14:1—15:47

The four narrations of the last days of Jesus' life on earth are the most similar of all Gospel narratives even though each evangelist makes his own particular theological points. Those points often come out in subtle details. By paying attention to some of Mark's details, we can appreciate what he is telling us about Jesus and how he is challenging us as disciples to take up our part in the Gospel.

When Jesus sent the disciples for the "colt," he instructed the disciples to explain why they were going off with it by saying, "The Lord has need of it." This is the only time Jesus refers to himself as "Lord" (kurios) and the only time he says he is in need of something. The subtle message is that a colt, according to Matthew a donkey or work-beast, is the only thing this Lord needs in order to appear in all his glory as a servant.

Mark tells us that they brought Jesus the colt and they put their own cloaks on it for him. Symbolically, like blind Bartimaeus who threw off his cloak to come to Jesus, they gave him their all, their cloak of protection and identity. For the moment, at least, they were fully with him.

At this point the people cry out "Hosanna!" which means "Save!" Some spread their cloaks on the road and others waved branches as in a triumphal procession. As he recorded this, Mark understood well the irony of the people's cry and their acclamation of the one humbly riding a donkey as the Son of David. They shouted, "Blessed is the kingdom ... that is to come," but they had no idea of what they were saying.

After the procession with palms, we will hear the passion story according to Mark. In contrast to the scene with a crowd who processed with Jesus acclaiming him as the successor to David, our Gospel opens simply with Jesus at table in a

home. A woman enters the scene and pours oil over his head. In Jeremiah 31:22 we hear that as the Lord is creating something new, the woman is solicitous for the man; here, we see a woman anointing Jesus the way a prophet would anoint a king. In response to her critics, Jesus tells them that the anointing is preparation for his death — which we can interpret as a reference to his burial but also to the inscription over his head which publicly identified him as king of the Jews.

There's a parallel to the entry into Jerusalem when, in Chapter 14, the disciples ask Jesus about where they should prepare the Passover meal for him. Again, Mark tells the story with subtle irony. First, they ask where they should prepare it only to discover that he has everything prepared — he knows where the room is and how they shall find it; they need but do what he tells them and carry through with the details. Secondly, Mark makes the point that they ask "Where do you want us to ... prepare for you to eat the Passover." He answered with the where, but specified that he would eat this Passover "with my disciples," indicating that the coming Passover was not his alone; they, too, would be part of fulfilling the covenant it signified, even though they may not have understood it. Mark emphasizes that a second time, as he describes Jesus blessing the cup. He says that Jesus "took a cup and gave thanks and gave it to them, and they all drank from it." Only after they had shared in his cup did he explain, "This is my blood of the covenant which will be shed for many."

The distinction between preparing the Passover for him or for all of them and their communion with him in the cup of his self-giving, even before they knew what it implied, are keys to understanding Mark's sense of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. In saying they would prepare the Passover for Jesus, they were ready for him to be their kingly Messiah, one who would do everything for them. Instead, this Passover was for all of them and when they gave him their cloaks and drank from his cup, they expressed their willingness to be disciples in spite of the pettiness, weakness and ignorance that would continue to plague them.

The rest of the drama will play out showing how the disciples were both willing and weak. When Jesus died on the cross, according to Mark the only disciples on the scene were some women who did all they could by simply standing by him.

The entire story invites us to see where we stand and where we wish we would stand. The good news is that, in the end, an angel tells the women to send the disciples back to Galilee. They can start all over again, this time more ready to remain in solidarity with their humble Lord.

Planning: Palm Sunday

By: Lawrence Mick

That's the rather awkward title that the Missal gives to this Sunday. While it's a lot of words for a title, it does serve to remind us that this day has a dual focus: the blessing and procession with palms and the proclamation of the Passion.

This Sunday marks the beginning of what has traditionally been called Holy Week. It's still a valid term, but it has the disadvantage of ignoring the shift that occurs Thursday evening, when Lent ends and the Triduum begins. This is the final Sunday of Lent, while the proclamation of the Passion points us toward Good Friday. Today's liturgy points us toward the whole Triduum. A big challenge for parish leaders is to help the assembly understand the importance of those Three Days so that they will come to participate in those central liturgies of our year. Preachers might focus the homily on the importance of the Triduum. (See p. 178 in Gabe Huck's *The Three Days* for an example.)

Perhaps the biggest challenge for this Sunday is the procession with the palms. In the Roman Rite, we don't process the entire assembly very often, so it requires some extra guidance until people learn how to do it well. Make sure ushers are stationed at key points along the route to guide people, to warn them about steps, etc. Tell the assembly clearly who will lead the procession and when they are to follow. To sustain the singing, spread the choir members through the assembly so that they can help people stay on key and in time with the rest.

A key breakdown point comes when the procession enters the worship space. We need to instruct people to stay in the procession all the way to the sanctuary and then use the side aisles (or whatever works best in your space) to go to their seats. Otherwise the procession just ends when the first people start entering the seats.

Take time before beginning the service with the palms to explain the procession, but also remind the assembly of the key points right before the procession starts.

For the blessing of palms, note that this year there is a choice between the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John. Both texts are in the Missal, so there is no need to carry the Lectionary or the Book of the Gospels to the place where the assembly gathers.

If you don't do the procession at each Mass this weekend, consult the rubrics in the Missal for the solemn entrance or the simple entrance. No matter how you begin, take the extra care required to make the ritual flow smoothly. That's important all this week, and the extra effort will help people enter into the deeper meaning of what we celebrate together.

Prayers: Palm Sunday

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

We open this most Holy Week continuing the theme of the cost of faithful obedience and the reality of suffering. It is easy to be enamored with the concept of love, but the truth is that love is costly. Revelation is the story of God's great love for us. Today, we remember the cost of that love in Jesus' passion and death, and we ask ourselves where we fit in all of this. The answer is profoundly humbling, no matter who we are.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you became the suffering servant for each of us: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you freely embraced your suffering and death: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you emptied yourself upon the cross: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider As we enter into this Holy Week, we pray humbly for what we need and gratefully for God's love for us.

Minister For the church: that we may be faithful witnesses to the depth and meaning of God's unconditional love ... with humble hearts, we pray,

- For those throughout the world who are suffering through no fault of their own; and for the redemption of those who cause their suffering ... with humble hearts, we pray,
- For all who feel abandoned or humiliated; for those suffering from abuse or bullying, physical or mental illness, or any kind of debilitating burden ... with humble hearts, we pray,
- For the courage and persistence to follow the way of Jesus Christ even when it leads to suffering, humiliation or death, that we may remain faithful disciples ... with humble hearts, we pray,
- For the courage to engage in uncomfortable, risky or costly actions on behalf of others ... with humble hearts, we pray,
- For those in this community who need our prayers and support, especially those unable to be present with us during this Holy Week ... with humble hearts, we pray,

Presider Holy God, we enter into this week with deep respect and silence, conscious of the depth of Jesus' faithfulness. Help us to follow in his footsteps — wherever that may lead. We make this prayer in the name of one who emptied himself for us. Amen.

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